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PRAYER
IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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About the Author

Professor emeritus of philosophy at Haverford College, where he taught from 1928 to 1964, Douglas Steere is a noted author whose books include *Prayer and Worship, On Beginning from Within, Work and Contemplation, Dimensions of Prayer,* and *Quaker Spirituality.* His contributions both to Quakerism and to the world at large have been many. Long Clerk of the Pendle Hill Board of Managers, he has also headed the Friends World Committee for Consultation, and has carried out many missions in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, India, and Japan for the American Friends Service Committee. He represented the Religious Society of Friends as an observer-delegate at Vatican Council II, and has served both the National and the World Council of Churches.

He writes of the present work, "I have always believed that interior prayer is to religion what original research is to science. These thirty personal messages that move across the web of prayer—interweaving the unlimited liability that marks genuine commitment, the dimensions of a vital ecumenism, and the interior gathering that is nurtured by corporate worship—were all written at the close of Vatican Council II, when I lay in my bed at Haverford recovering from blood poisoning. Originally designed to be used as a month's preparation for the World Day of Prayer, they almost wrote themselves, and still seem undated enough to justify republication. I am grateful to Pendle Hill for returning them to circulation."

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The Case Against Prayer in the Contemporary World

Dean Inge once said that the greatest enemy of high religion is not irreligion but low religion. In our contemporary world there is a real case being put against the whole exercise of prayer as being superstitious, as being nothing but autosuggestion, as being pietistic and self-centered, and as having little place in a scientific world of maturely religious people.

What is really being attacked in these charges? Are they leveled against high prayer or are they attacks on the low forms of prayer that masquerade under the name? In some forms of prayer, people think that by repeating certain clusters of words they can ward off danger or compel success. This is actually magic and is the shadow but not the substance of genuine prayer. As for prayer being autosuggestion, what does that mean? It means literally that in prayer I guide and direct my thoughts rather than letting them be heterosuggested by any stimulus that happens to draw them along. Yes, in a sense all prayer begins by my guiding my thoughts and pointing them toward the highest that I know. This is not all that there is to prayer. But it describes quite honestly the way it always begins, and it in no way disparages it. How else would a free human being begin?

As for the prayer being pietistic, this has not always been a word of depreciation. True piety means only that the one who prays acknowledges something greater and higher in the universe to which she seeks to open. Certainly there are prayers that are self-centered. Few of us can begin at any other point. But true prayer need not end there and seldom does. As for the scientific character of our world, there is nothing in science's mental skim of symbolism that exhausts that toward which the symbolism points, or denies that it is the only symbol capable of reflecting the heart of reality. Prayer is an alternative and legitimate approach to the real and is in no sense excluded by the scientific approach to life. Prayer is to religion what original research is to science. The case against prayer in contemporary life can only cleanse true prayer of its shadows and compel it to show its truest face.

O God, we thank you for the honest doubts and criticisms of those who blister our clumsy efforts at prayer with their fiercely honest attacks. May that which is phony and specious and egocentric in our prayers be seared away by these helpful blasts. Cleanse, cauterize, and cut away that which separates us from you and from each other, and give us yourself and the open way into the hearts of those with whom we live.

Simone Weil died in 1943 at the age of thirty-three. She was serving with the French Resistance forces in England at the time and trying to live on the food ration of a French workman in occupied France. Through her posthumous writings, she became a kind of apostle of the spiritual life of France during the first decade after World War II. At the heart of her insights is her definition of prayer as *attention.* Her French forebear, Pascal, would have approved of this for he felt that the greatest enemy, not only of prayer but also of the whole spiritual life, was inattention, drowsiness, complacency, what he called "the Gethsemane sleep," referring to what the Apostles did when Jesus asked them to watch with him.

"Blessed are the drowsy ones for they shall soon drop off to sleep!" wrote Nietzsche, and this satirical warning holds for those who do not pray. For prayer is awakeness, attention, intense inward openness. In a certain way sin could be described, and described with a good deal of penetration, by noting that it is anything that destroys this attention. Pride, self-will, self-absorption, doublemindedness, dishonesty, sexual excess, overeating, over-drinking, over-activity of any sort, all destroy attention and all cut the nerve of effective prayer. Just as sleep is upset by any serious mental disturbance, so attention is dispersed when unfaced sin gets the ascendancy. If prayer is attention, then it is naturally attention to the highest thing that I know, to my "ultimate concern," and this human prayer means a moving out of a life of inattention, out of the dispersion, out of "the Gethsemane sleep" into the life of openness and attention to the highest that I know. God can only disclose the divine whispers to those who are attending. Dorothy Hutchinson once quoted a Sengalese proverb which says that "The opportunity which God sends does not wake up him who is sleeping."

O God rouse my dispersed spirit from its stupefied torpor. Wake the sleeper in me and kindle such a fire in my heart that I shall never be content with anything short of you. Re-light in me the flame of a steady life of prayer. O God, keep open, keep open, my mind, my heart, my soul.

What Is Going On in the Universe?

Ignatius of Loyola once said: "I come from God. I belong to God. I return to God." Each of these statements is an admirable subject for meditation. They assume what all Christian prayer assumes, namely, that I do not pray in a vacuum. Something tremendous is going on, and when I pray, the most important thing of all is that I shall come into a deep, inward realization of what is really taking place in the cosmos. For the Christian religion affirms that there is a process of costly redemption going on here and now. It affirms that God is the ground of the whole universe and that in the same breath God is the lover engaged in besieging the soul of every man and woman that comes into this world. This love is costly, as the disclosure of it in Jesus Christ made crystal clear. "In Jesus, God came all the way downstairs." And it is still going on. "Jesus shall be in agony until the end of the world," Pascal declared, and in this he speaks of this costly longing that is drawing at the whole cosmos.

This redemptive love can reconcile any separation, any dissonance, any malformation, and in its sweep it is even conceivable that all of the departed ones who have joined this costly siege are pouring into it their prayers. When I pray, then, I do not begin this process. It is already going on. It has bidden me to pray. "You would not have sought me if you had not already found me." Prayer is not initiating this redemptive yearning. It is a becoming aware of it and a joining it. When I pray, I wake up, I attend, and I discover that "I came from God. I belong to God. I return to God," and that the thrust of my prayer has been swept up into a force mightier than I ever could have imagined had I not experienced it.

O God from whom I came, how prone I am to think that I am self-initiated and self-propelled and self-sufficient. But my restless heart knows in its ground that it can be quieted only by returning to its Source, from whom it sprang, and to whom it belongs, and to whom it must one day return. O God, as I gather myself in prayer, may I ever begin by recalling what is going on, what it is costing, and why I have forgotten. "Whom have I in heaven but thee and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth, but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever."

How to Deal With Distractions in Prayer

When I settle down to pray, I am invariably aware of all kinds of distractions. There are the noises that hammer their way into my thoughts and upset me: the neighbor's radio, the children's shouting, the traffic roar, the whine of a low-flying jet. Or there are the inner distractions of my dispersed spirit: the thought of my domestic problems, of my business affairs, of my failures, of my unfinished business that has been laid upon the table to be disposed of later. There is no choice in the matter. These are always there. What do I do?

Any seasoned veteran of prayer knows that if he resents these distractions, fights them, resists them, and tries to drive them out of his mind, he is lost. For in the course of doing battle with these "intruders," the conditions of receptivity, of attention, have vanished. If instead of doing battle with them, I acknowledge them as a part of my world and of my life, perhaps even bowing to them in salute to confirm this acknowledgment, and then with them continuing to be present, perhaps during my entire time of prayer, I gently move on in to greet and be greeted by the Giver of Love, and a whole new situation is created. Now I do not fear to take this strange, noisy, dispersed world as the husk of my life into the Presence, knowing that it is not the destruction but the hallowing of this husk that God desires. There is an old Jewish legend that even suggests that the reason these distractions appear in a season of prayer is that they know that a blessing awaits that season, and they long in their own way to share in it. What a difference to be willing to sit down among these ragged aspects of my inner self and not to drive them away but to welcome them as companions on a journey whose direction, however, they do not determine.

O God, I come to you not alone but in the midst of this tattered company. This is the kind of being I am, God, and the kind of companions I flock with, and the kind of world I inhabit. Give us your blessing, O friend of my soul, and draw us into the tendering warmth of your presence.

On Befriending Others in Prayer

When I touch the heart of prayer, I touch the lives of others, for in some mysterious way which we cannot depict more than to point toward it, we are all interconnected in the life of God, and we are never nearer to another than when we touch his life in the life of God. Intercessory prayer is going on all the time. There is something at the heart of things that cares and that carries on this never-pausing siege at the East window of each soul. When I pray for another, I enter into this siege. I add my caring to help lower the threshold in the heart of the other to this continuous caring. Whether the other knows of this or not, something takes place. What results is not always what I may have begun to pray for, for there is a purification of my prayer that takes place as it is carried into this stream of redemptive love, but my intention—of bringing the soul of my friend, or of some situation in the world, or of warding off some threatening disaster—is lifted out of its frame and used.

Archbishop Temple went so far as to suggest that the ultimate purpose of God is unchanging, but that God's strategy is infinitely variable. And by this Temple meant in the case of intercessory prayer, in which he deeply believed, that my effort or my failure to pray might be the decisive factor that might fulfill or might fail a situation and require the whole chain of God's strategy to be altered. Intercessory prayer always involves myself as well as the other. "Thy will be done, in John and *in me.* Thy kingdom come, in John and *in me.*" This coinherence, or "carrying," of another which was at the heart of Charles Williams's message in his great novel *Descent into Hell* not only matters but in some ways may be all that does matter in times of great crisis.

Befriending the souls of humankind is the most social act that there is. But it does not stop with prayer and so often involves us in all kinds of other areas of caring as well. Any prayer life that has not yet discovered the intercessory dimension is still callow. There is no richer area for exploration than this for the seekers in the life of prayer for our generation.

O God who has carried us when we knew it not, and who faithfully seeks us when we are yet afar off, lay on us this ministry of intercession for others, that we may share this deepest of all ministries that brings us down into the very matrix of your yearning for souls and makes us members of the great chain of redemptive love that girdles our world for its healing.

Prayer Sweeps Away Our Reservations

Francois de Sales defines devotion as the "promptitude, fervor, affection, and agility" which we show in the service of God. Promptitude, fervor, affection, and agility: what words these are! Augustine speaks of the long prelude to his own conversion in which he asked God to change his heart, "but not yet." The tragedy of postponed obedience revealed in Augustine's life is the tragedy in the life of each of us. Promptitude, fervor, affection, and agility mean willingness to move now, instantly, without any interval. When I have visited someone and leave and write a letter of thanks for his hospitality but put off doing it for three weeks, what happens to the communication of my gratitude? My friend is as clear as I am that I did not really care much about his loving pains to look after me. If I had cared, the letter would have been in the next mail and all of my excuses do not change the situation. When I really care, I act swiftly, fervently, and with agility.

Prayer is a great quickener of the heart and nothing can draw me more readily toward swiftness, fervor, and agility than a season of prayer. For prayer sweeps away our reservations, our safety devices, our hiding places, and brings into the open what is laid upon us. Prayer makes us expendable, makes us realize that we are lent to be spent. For one who feels put upon and exploited and who has a bill of complaints against God, prayer in the presence of the Crucified One is a perfect place to become the prosecuting attorney and to pour out all manner of bitter things that may have lodged in the heart. Long experience may reveal that the Silent One has a way of restoring the balance in the heart of the prosecutor and that the tendering that takes place there makes for the swiftness, fervor, and agility of the heart that were previously missing. There is such a strange disequilibrium in the human heart between what it really wants to do, and what its surface wants may twist it into performing. In prayer the deep want is restored, and what Gabriel Marcel calls *disponibilité* ("availability") appears.

O God, help me to want what I really want to do, and strip from me the reservations and hesitations which the sluggard in me has thrown up. Kindle in me such a flame that I shall be swept with the passion of swiftness, fervor, and agility in your service. Snip the leash that I am always retying and draw me into the self-spending life of your human servants.

Prayer and Prayerfulness

There can be no denying that specific acts of prayer that I consciously plan and carry out are necessary to a frail and earth-bound human being with a short memory. But these specific acts of prayer are only a means to an end. The end is a more continual state of prayerfulness or openness that goes on through the day and through the night. This is what we might call a state of "walking contemplation" or even a parenthesis around our sleep. Back of all that I do, there may come a sense of something undergirding it and something that, when there are intervals in my outer work, flows up to the surface again.

This prayerfulness can only be compared to the sense of glow that one has when in love. Obviously work has to be done which requires full attention, but when this is broken off, the wonder and security and surge of gladness return, and never fully leave as the background of all that one is about. This is what is meant by those like Frank Laubach and Thomas Kelly who talk of praying continually. It means an openness to people, a willingness really to listen, really to enter into what they are trying to say, an openness to the new and fresh and original in all that is about me, and, deepest of all, it means an openness to the inward whispering. It means in crises that there is a further perspective that I seek, and it means in times when this is in eclipse that the knowledge that it *has* been buoys me up and gives me faith that it will be again.

The Quaker mystic Isaac Penington, who quite cheerfully spent much of his later life in English jails, thanks to the persecutions heaped on that group in the third quarter of the seventeenth century, put it all very precisely when he said, "There is that near you which will guide you. O wait for it and mind that you keep to it." For "that which will guide you" and that continual undergirding coalesce in the deepest range of prayerfulness, and the full dimension of the Christian life contains both.

O God, my inward teacher, my kindler and sustainer, my hidden companion and the love of my life, forbid me from settling for a life of uncollected dispersion in outward activism or inward torpor. Quicken my inward ears that I may hear the pulses of the divine whisper and live as one who walks through the dream of life as one awake.

If there is something of great moment going on behind the screen of outward events and this great impulse of redemptive love is forever besieging us, why are we not more open to its guidance? There is an old story of a small boy who was puzzling over Holman Hunt's great painting that shows the figure of Jesus knocking at the door of a house—a weed-clogged door that is only able to be opened from the inside. The child asked his father why the people didn't open the door, and then with a cry of discovery he gave his own answer. "I think I know why they don't open the door. They're all down in the basement and they don't hear him."

The basement where the gentle knocking is inaudible is so expressive of the human condition as we know it today, that it seems for many to take shattering experiences to rouse them to what is already going on. Phillips Brooks, who had no gift for keeping discipline, was literally run out of his job at the Boston Latin School. It was only out of a long breakdown that there emerged for him the call to prepare himself for the ministry. Thomas Kelly had a crushing blow to his academic ambitions dealt to him in the autumn of 1937 and he went through a time of brokenness and despair. Out of it came a whole new level of awareness of what was going on and the surge of new life which *A Testament of Devotion* shares with our generation.

For some it is the running away from home of a precious adolescent child, or the loss of a secure post, or a breakdown in mental or physical health, or the loss of a wife or a husband or a child through death that breaks through the hard hull of self-assurance. W. H. Auden has a line which says, "It is where we are wounded that God speaks to us." Auden does not say that God sends these wounds. But he seems to be saying that for some of us it is only in the depths of suffering that we seem open enough to listen to what, upon the occasion of this suffering, God has to say to us. "Behold I stand at the door and knock."

O God, I do not ask for wounds for I have many already. But I have not listened to find what, on such occasions, you have had to tell me. O open my inward ears and bring me up out of the basement of over-activity and self-preoccupation into the chamber where I may hear your word and respond to what I hear.

God Speaks in Prosperity and Power

St. Paul said, "I know how to be abased and I know how to abound." Of the two, it is harder to know how to abound. One of the great gifts of Bernard of Clairvaux, the twelfth-century spiritual guide, was a little book called *On Consideration,* written for his own Cistercian brother, who had become Pope Eugenius III. It was really a guide on how to bear the prosperity and power which had so suddenly descended upon this Cistercian in his new office as the supreme Pontiff. It suggests taking time for "consideration," by which he meant listening for the deeper wisdom in each situation. Bernard points out that his friend would be tempted to let the busyness of his many duties blot out this time of consideration.

This guide warns against becoming uncollected and being swept into the open channel where the decisions will be made according to considerations of power and expediency. Augustine says in his *Confessions:* "For I was collected from the dispersion in which I turned from Thee, the One, and was vainly divided." Bernard is seeking to turn his prosperous and, from the world's view, highly successful brother from this dispersion into the path of collectedness.

It is moving to read the life of Sir Thomas More when he was the Lord High Chancellor of England and at the height of his power under Henry VIII, and to find him spending every Friday, a day when the Court did not sit, in his little summer house along the banks of the Thames, giving himself to prayer, to religious reading, and to writing out his thoughts: in short to consideration in order that he might be able to guide his own and his family's life and that of his nation in a way that would be in right ordering. For it is *not only* when we are wounded that the bidding takes place, and those who have been given the batons of power and authority are not removed from God's communication or concern if they do not cut themselves off from it.

O God, whose hand is upon me both in times of strength and prosperity and in times of weakness and brokenness, may the threshold of my senses be lowered until I may bid you to cross and enter and give me the guidance which is your promise when I am open. Lay upon me the burden of the world's need and the world's suffering, that I may see it from within and be made more ready to minister to it with all the powers at my command.

There are times when we come to plateaus and when we do not seem to be able to get beyond them. Sometimes we have poured out all that we have into a family, a spouse, a career, or into a series of ventures, and have seemed now to come to the end of this life stage. It is strange business how certain things seem to have to die before others can be born.

I remember the late Elin Wagner, the only woman writer in her later years to be a member of the Swedish National Academy, telling me how one time when she reached a point in her fifties, having already written a shelf of books, she had come to the end of her tether. She had written herself out, and she determined that she would not write another page until something within her opened up and another level in her being emerged. She told God that unless he spoke to her and opened this new vein in her she would remain silent. She went about her ordinary household and garden chores in her little home in the Smaland woods, saw something of her friends, but did no writing. Then, after several months, one fine morning she was overwhelmed by a sense of God's presence and by something that seemed to say to her, "How could you expect to have me speak to you when you have kept me gagged for so long!" A whole new wave of release came to her and a tumble of creativity emerged. Strangely enough, up to that time she had tried fiercely to keep from revealing in her books any of her own private life, some of which had been highly painful. When this new burst came, it swept away all of that restraint. Now if she had anything in her private experience that might encourage others, it was free and available for use. Plateaus need not be permanent or final if we are open for a disclosure of God's further landscape.

O God, whose great waves often are able to seize me who had thought myself forever abandoned high up on the shore, and to sweep me out into the ocean of your creative love, and to set me afloat again, lift me this day back into your ocean. If I resist you or draw beyond even the sweep of today's wave of your compassion, O keep sweeping ever higher, O God, until I am no longer reluctant to accept your invitation to move into the deeps and into the new to which you have bidden me.

God Speaks in Books

At many turnings in life, meeting with a book which has a message in it for us may be decisive in speaking to our condition. When Arthur Shearly Cripps, a young English poet who was a clergyman in an Anglican parish in Essex, was in his late twenties in 1899, he read a book by Olive Schreiner, *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*. It described the way the Rhodesians had put down the African rebellion in 1896, and it gave such a vivid picture of the wrongs which the Africans suffered that Cripps felt called to leave his comfortable parish and to offer himself for missionary service in Rhodesia to try as a Christian to balance the situation a little. In this way a career was launched which kept Cripps in Rhodesia till death took him in 1952 and gave to the Rhodesian Africans perhaps their most beloved white champion and the example of a life in which Christ was seen to live again.

Often the decisive book has been the Bible, as was the case with Augustine when the voice in the garden seemed to tell him "take and read" and when the verse confirmed the long-delayed yielding of his life to Christ. Francis of Assisi got the rule for his order out of a reading of the Gospel one morning during the Mass.

It is not only in the initiation of the religious life that books may be vital. In the feeding of the soul and the mind and in the unfolding of the Christian vocation, they are equally crucial. John Woolman, the Quaker saint, was a hard reader all his life, and the great Alsatian Christian pastor, John Fredric Oberlin, who transformed his mountain region, read three books a month over a period of forty years.

Books and the written word are often God's vehicles for speaking to us if we are prepared inwardly and are ready to listen to their message to us. A Christian who is alive will be feeding the spirit continually on the company of good books and will read with that kind of attention that is always secretly asking for a further disclosure.

O God who has spoken to us through the word of the Bible and spoken to us through the moving scenes of great books, help us to have both the appetite and the capacity for discernment that will lead us to expose ourselves to the great books of all times and to find in them the word that is meant for us at that particular moment. Speak your word to us as we read, and give us the grace of the listener who not only listens but who also hears.

God Speaks in Dreams

There are times when God speaks to us in a dream. The Bible is full of stories of those who have been visited by the Spirit in a dream and from the dream have gotten the fresh message for their lives. In Africa it is interesting to find that the majority of calls to the vocation of the ministry have come to Africans in dreams and have been faithfully followed. In our more sophisticated Western world we are more cautious, and we look askance at the world of dreams. But again and again there come tender scenes in dreams that bring us into a whole new relationship to our fellows. There may also come realizations in dreams of the disastrous course into which our present life is leading us, and the abyss may even be shown to us in this deep unconscious vision, and we may be brought to see that we must turn in a new direction if we are not to be decimated by the way we have taken.

Why we ignore the deep unconscious life in us is hard to understand. When Carl Jung speaks of the unchanged, unconscious psychic life in us and says, "Ruling interest and impulses do not spring from the sphere of Christianity but from the unconscious and undeveloped psyche, which is as pagan and archaic as ever," he is only paraphrasing the insight that goes all through the Gospels and the Pauline teaching that unless the unconscious has embraced the new way of life, it can never be more than a veneer. The dream life comes from the ground and is a communication with this deep life within us. Therefore it is precious and to be treasured and attended to. A dream ignored is like an unopened letter that has been neglected.

O God whose burning life flows in our veins, and beats in our hearts, and pours into our nostrils, and makes us children of God, may we in the blaze of your grace be open for all the intimations that you give us by night as well as by day and attentive to find in them the message of your surging life for our instruction. May we never scorn these intimations in ourselves or in others but be made more open for their instruction.

God Speaks Through Friends

God often speaks to us through a friend, for of all the gifts that this earthly life offers there are few that surpass the blessing of having a real friend. Friends can be soft pillows on which to rest or to weep and may simply confirm our life betrayals and be a part of the shield against the true invitations because they comfort us by having made the same compromises that we have. But friends can be the emissaries of God in that they confirm in us the deepest longings we have already had and give us courage to respond to them. "In your friend you shall find your truest enemy," Nietzsche declares, referring to the enmity in a true friend against that which is low in us. We all need this kind of enmity, either spoken or unspoken, and we all need some understanding one to whom we can pour out our failures, our infidelities, and our deepest longings. Even the Pope has a confessor!

It is stirring to see John Bright's close friend Cobden coming to him when Bright had lost his young wife through death and was broken by it, and Cobden laying on him the task of fighting for the poor in England and trying to get the Corn Laws passed. Alan Paton spent seven years writing a biography of his longtime friend, Jan Hofmeyer. In a certain way, he did it to repay his debt to the man who laid hold of Paton when he was a schoolmaster and persuaded him to undertake the juvenile reformatory at Diepkloof out of which came the experience that made him able to write his classic *Cry the Beloved Country.*

When Rufus Jones was a young man, he was much drawn to a young English Quaker scholar, John Wilhelm Rowntree, and these two resolved to lift the sights of the highly traditional Religious Society of Friends and to encourage it to rekindle its life for the service of the world of our time. John Wilhelm Rowntree died in his thirties of an incurable disease, but much of the dream they had dreamed together was carried out by Rufus Jones, and much of their vision was realized in the generation that followed. God often speaks to men and women through their friends when the friendship is of this noble quality.

O God, we thank you for the gift of friendship and for the mutual kindling that such a gift may bring. Lift the level of our friendships and make us willing to be the kind of a friend in which this tie may be a thin point in the membrane through which your word may touch us both.

There can be no mistaking Jesus's withering words to the security-encrusted "rich" who already have their reward. In Dives, who is secure and full of himself, there is room neither for Lazarus nor for God. Yet there has always been something intriguing about Jesus's passion for the poor and his laying on those who would follow him the special commission to pour out their love and their substance on the poor. Francis of Assisi took Matthew 25 literally and gave not only his purse but also his heart and his love to the poor, and he walked into the heart of his own and succeeding generations. Mother Teresa has done the same in our time.

Is it conceivable that Jesus saw that the way to touch any society was at its Achilles heel, by serving the group whom it wanted to hide from its sight not only because it hurt to look at these people but also because of the reproach which their condition cast on its own smug life? Surely the leper in Francis's day was one of these as in our own day are the neurotic, the prisoner, the delinquent, the insane, the congenitally handicapped, the incompetent, the misfits, or the decrepit elderly. Yet to serve these rejected ones is to reach straight to the quick of that very society and to touch it and open it to its own condition.

Why is this the case? Could it be that the sight of such service to its own rejected ones is a kind of long-postponed acknowledgment that we are all bound in the same bundle: that we are all sick, all prisoners, all neurotic in our way, and that to touch the openly needy is to touch us all? Is "There but for the grace of God, go I," replaceable now by "There go I," and does this admission join us again to all the living?

Who are "the poor" anyway? Am I "the poor"? Are we perhaps all within one bloodstream, all served by the same crimson current? And finally, can we discover a mutual ministry to one another when this bloodstream of our common humanity is restored? Yes, God does speak to us in the poor.

O God, how glibly we have used the words "poor" and "service to the poor." How little we have realized that the poor in my generation may be able to open to me my own poverty and to encourage me to rejoin the human race and to be swept by the new hope for us all which this kindles. O living God, pour through the newly opened arteries of our common life and wipe out all distinctions as we speak to one another's need.

Unlimited Liability and Self-Acceptance

If there is one phrase that can sweep together the whole ethical message of the Gospels, it might well be the "unlimited liability" which we bear for our fellow human beings in this world. To be sure, this is grounded on the Gospel message that each person, no matter what his weakness, is of equal worth in the sight of God, but it goes further and lays this unlimited liability upon us. Jesus's reply in that critical chapter of Matthew 25 to the one who asks when they might have seen him sick, or naked, or hungry, or a prisoner, rings down through the ages: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

At the beginning, it might be well to note that this responsibility to accept all has a very difficult catch in it. It might even apply to self-acceptance. The psychologist Jung has most disconcertingly asked whether one of "the least of these my brethren" might possibly be my own despised self whom I am forever bemoaning as too heavy a burden to bear, or bitterly reproaching Providence for not having made more handsome, or more brilliant, or more capable, or more attractive. Dom Chapman once suggested in a letter to a friend that "it is really a very perfect act of love to God" to accept ourselves and to put this scarred and wearisome person into God's hands and get on with the work to be done.

A short while before his death Rabbi Susya said, "In the world to come I shall not be asked, 'Why were you not Moses?' I shall be asked, 'Why were you not Susya?'" And a fellow Hasid, Rabbi Bunan, spoke in a like vein when he said, "I should not like to change places with Father Abraham! Rather than have this happen, I think I shall try to become a little more myself."

Unlimited liability may have to begin by laying aside self-hate or the wish to be someone else as a major act of disobedience and a taking back of myself as the vehicle, in all of its inadequacy and frailty, as the "poor thing but mine own" which I acknowledge and accept and seek to put ever more at God's disposal.

O God, I accept myself, the unacceptable, because you have accepted me, the unacceptable. Without further fuss or feathers I mean to get on with myself and with your help to spend myself in your service.

In the family the unlimited liability is never relinquished. Who knows what this amazing school for charity known as the family will ask of me next? Who knows what hidden secret is sheathed in those islands of mystery known as children? Who knows what the life partner may disclose in the way of new and undreamed-of levels of creativity which it is hers or his to develop, and what adjustments may be called for in order to make this possible?

When a father complained to the great Hasidic spirit of eighteenth-century Judaism, Baal-Shem Tov, "My son is estranged from God—what shall I do?" he replied, "Love him more." When a married partner complains that he is not really understood by his spouse, that she seems estranged from him, would the answer be any different? Someone has suggested that all the troubles come from not saying what we mean and not doing what we say. How swiftly the family discloses the gaps between what we mean and what we say and what we say and what we do, and how often is forgiveness and a fresh start necessary? How restored a parent often is by having the child in the family quicken again the awe-filled, wonder-tipped child in his own heart out of which all that is best in him comes. And what gaiety and fun and special secrets and family projects grow out of this relationship!

The notion of each being liable without limits to help the others come through to what they are meant to be is an assignment beyond any we may have reckoned with when we were in the callow stage of considering what a Christian family asked of its members. But is there any "this far and no further" that dare be put upon the family's liability for each other? What a nursery for the Christian life and for Christian charity this mutual support of a real family can be! If it ever gave over, what would replace it?

O God, we thank you for using the family to reveal to us the way in which your own love is poured out upon us even when we do not respond to it. Without the family, O ever loving Parent, we might never have known how your heart felt. O lay on each of us the needs of the others in our families. Grant us the grace to respond with imagination and delicacy to these needs and the constancy of affection so that when we fail, the other member of this gallant company will at least come to know that we cared, and that we cherish them. You who have cherished us, quicken in us the tender gift of cherishing, for to live in a Christian family is to live in a perpetual season of cherishing.

Unlimited Liability and My Work

When I think of what the Gospel ethic of unlimited liability lays upon me in my vocation, it is clear that it gives it a fresh frame of meaning. All work must have some frame of meaning or it destroys its human instruments. Often it gets it from its own internal satisfactions, or from the human associations of fellow workers, or the people who are dependent on the service that is rendered. But when, in addition, there is a sense of real calling that is added to these, there is scarcely a limit to what can be carried and to the effort which men and women will put forth in giving to the work all that they have. A young woman who had been a brilliant student in college and was now the mother of four small children and drenched in the biological haze of coping with her situation, nailed her Phi Beta Kappa key to the kitchen wall in front of her sink just to remind her of what she had once been and might be again! Another person I know has a religious picture or a telling verse pinned up in the same place to help restore the frame for the routine work that comes in a modern household. A single woman insists on making her own bread and doing all the household chores, feeling that these keep her in unity with womankind everywhere and make her fruitful even though she has never borne a child.

A man working on the assembly line of a highly automatized factory cannot escape the bite of Martin Buber's word about dialogue between human spirits even in such a remote place where he says, "No factory or no office is so abandoned by creation that a creative glance could not fly up from one working place to another, from desk to desk, a sober and brotherly glance which guarantees the reality of what is happening. And nothing is so valuable a service of dialogue between God and man as such an unsentimental and unreserved exchange of glances between two men in an alien place." A woman in Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country,* who is being thanked for going far beyond the limits of any liability which her work required, replies only with, "For what else was I born?" and the frame of the Gospel ethic emerges again. Ruysbroeck has a word about this frame that wings its shaft through our vocations as through all of our lives: "The love of Jesus is both avid and generous. All that he is and all that he has, he gives; and all that I am and all that I have, he takes."

O God who gives and gives and never counts the cost, sweep away our webs of calculation and give us that abandon which your son Jesus Christ has disclosed to us. Frame what we do with a sense of meaning that in all our work we may know that we are a living part of your continuing creation.

When it comes to the application of the Gospel ethic to my own immediate community, it is almost incredible to see how slow I have often been to see the impossible situation of a committed Christian accepting, as I have accepted, the disparities of life settings and life opportunities that swarm all about me. Cutting us off from those about us are the invisible lines that we have assumed could never be changed. We are horrified at the apartheid in South Africa with its exclusion of whole groups from accepted society. But we move to a suburb or put up a cyclone fence between our property and that of a decaying slum, or we see housing and school facilities and upper-bracket employment denied to a racial minority in our midst and never turn a hair. It is so much easier to wring our hands and demand a boycott and a blockade over social injustice elsewhere.

When the Gospel ethic of unlimited liability begins to "take," the eyes begin to open and to see what they look at. In every community there are a few people who are always available to move the fences outwards and to erase the invisible lines, and you cannot seem to ask too much of them. Dean Briggs of Harvard used to say that there were two types of persons when you needed them this way. There were those who were *there,* and those who were *not there.* Matthew 25 all over again: "When saw we thee?" And these persons have a way of awakening their neighbors.

There was a Roman Catholic priest in Detroit who used his church in the derelict section of the city as a place of service for the outcasts whom no one else wanted. The city welfare office called him one day about one of their "cases" and told him that the city of Detroit was through for good with this man, that he was undeserving, and they would do nothing more for him. The priest said, "Send him along to us. We're all undeserving down here." In my community, as the Gospel ethic begins to dawn on me, all kinds of new and alarming and highly unpopular insights begin to lift above the parapet. Are there to be no limits at all to my vulnerability? William Russell Maltby would answer this question by noting that Jesus promised the disciples who would follow him only three things: "that they should be absurdly happy, entirely fearless, and always in trouble."

O God who wakens the sleepers and who opens the eyes of the heart in frail and highly conventional people like myself, give courage and wisdom that I, too, may become one of those who when I am needed am "there."

Unlimited Liability and My Nation

It is not easy to see how to reconcile the claims which the state may make upon my loyalty and the unlimited liability which I as a Christian bear for all people. There are surely duties I owe to the state which orders the relatively secure roof over my head. Yet ready as we must be to help the state sustain this order, the Christian's duty does not stop at the frontier of the nation-state. For the state is only an arbitrary limitation, and what happens to the sister or brother who is outside its boundaries is of primary concern for the Christian. God is always revising our boundaries outwards.

A Quaker relief worker after the First World War was in charge of relief food and supplies in a region of rural Poland. In the course of her service she caught spotted typhus and died. The question was where to bury this beloved friend in a Polish village which contained only the Roman Catholic cemetery that by canonical law could not receive the body of a non-Roman Catholic. She was finally laid in a grave just outside the fence of the Catholic cemetery, and that night the peasants moved the fence to take in the grave! Christian citizens have a responsibility not only to support the creative order of the state but also to make it increasingly responsible for the deprived both within and without its present boundaries.

The moral capital of every state is continually running down. It can only be restored again by the tender consciences of its vigilant citizens. Carl Schurz once declared, "My country: when right to be kept right; when wrong to be set right." By daring ventures and pilot projects that cross boundaries and serve people everywhere, by vulnerable concern for need wherever it may be found, by speaking for the silent ones, and by the courage not to be cowed by the state's demand for approval but to press to the end for the state "when wrong to be set right," Christians live always between their duties as citizens and the unlimited liability for all people laid upon them by the Gospel.

O God in whose holy Scriptures you have taught us that "for him that is joined to all the living there is hope," so join us to all the living that we may become children of hope and ever rekindle this hope in the hearts of our own nation.

Once when Dr. Albert Schweitzer made a safari in order to get to know the jungle regions from which most of his hospital patients came, the word went before him by the drums—the jungle telegraph—telling people what path he was taking and where they might bring their sick for him to help them. At one crossway he met a beautiful child whom the group asked him to look at and to treat. He asked them what was the matter with her, for she seemed in perfect health, and they replied in their delicate way that she "speaks with her eyes and she hears with her heart"—for she was deaf and dumb. The world is suffering today from too few people who "hear with their hearts." It is suffering from a drying up of compassion. Subjected as it is to a barrage of reports through our overweighted system of mass communications, the human spirit tends to withdraw and to feel hopeless about the sufferings and needs of human beings in distant places.

Corporate worship restores the hearing heart. Emma Caroline Noble, an English Quaker, sat in a silent meeting for worship during the worst of the unemployment in the Welsh coal mines in the middle twenties. She felt drawn into the Center and knew that she was liable for her world and very particularly for doing something about the plight of these Welsh miners. She consulted, as is the Quaker practice, with a few trusted Friends and they and her husband encouraged her. She set out for the Welsh coal fields quite unclear as to where and how she was meant to serve. After some fruitless search, she crossed into the Rhonda Valley and there the way opened. Out of her visit, a work covering more than a decade unfolded and resulted in people from all walks of life, including Oxford students and dons, spending time in the little self-help center that was set up. There was a visit by the Prince of Wales, a Royal Commission, and ultimately a genuine change in the whole situation. Individual faithfulness to my world has not been discarded in God's plan.

O God give me a hearing heart that I may dare to hear the needs of my world and be shown ways in which even I, in all of my weakness and frailty, may minister to them.

Unlimited Liability for Creation

Early in his remarkable *Journal,* John Woolman tells us how as a young man he was touched by God's spirit: "My heart was often tender and contrite, and universal love for my fellow creatures increased in me." Woolman, who was born in 1720, saw that his fellow creatures included black people as well as white, and in costly ways this man spent himself to abolish slavery. But he did not stop at this. He believed that his "fellow creatures" involved all of the animal world, and he encouraged people to be especially tender with the animal creation that had been entrusted to them.

Almost two hundred years later, this same universal love of fellow creatures under the formula "reverence for life" led Albert Schweitzer to spend himself in trying to encourage men to inflict no more pain than was necessary and to seek in every way possible to lessen pain. When men in our time have girded themselves with nuclear and biological weapons and are threatening to snuff out the whole biological creation if they believe their security is menaced, Albert Schweitzer, knowing well enough what he was doing, dared to bring down the ridicule of the chancelleries of the world upon his head by speaking up for creation. This he did with a trust that at least the women of the world would understand him, and support him in his plea to have an end of this threat.

In such a scene, the loving Creator of us all lays on you and on me unlimited liability for all creation and for our fellow creatures everywhere. And as God told Teresa of Avila when she begged for a holiday, "Now is not the time to rest."

O God of all creation enlarge our hearts with such a tenderness for all creation that we shall dare to speak up for all our fellow creatures and for the precious natural world that sustains them.

Ecumenism and the Invisible Lines

When we think of ecumenism, we inevitably think of limitations, or barriers, or invisible lines, and of overcoming them. For the term itself refers to an all-embracing or world-wide scope in which these limitations are absent. These limiting lines can be of very different sorts and the dissolving of them can be along very different lines, so that ecumenism covers a vast area. In 1944, Howard Thurman, the admired black leader, began a fascinating ecumenical venture in San Francisco where he built up a Fellowship Church made up of people of all denominations and of several different races. Howard told me once of a white woman in the group who asked him to call on her, and when he went to her she told him that she had brought him there to tell him seven reasons why she would never join the Fellowship Church. The last of these was that she just couldn't stand blacks. Howard laughed and said that he hoped she would continue to attend the church whether she ever joined or not and that she could never tell what God might do with her reservations. A few weeks later she told him that God had taken away two of the reservations but she assured him that number seven was still there. This kept on happening over a period of months until one morning she turned up and said, "Oh Dr. Thurman, even number seven is gone and I want to join the church!" Each of us has our list of reservations to coming closer to other denominational groups from whom we feel separated. Joining them may not be what is ultimately called for—or it may be—but the ability to pinpoint these barriers and to face them in God's presence is an ecumenical step of the first water and one which we can no longer delay.

O God, in whose eyes our separations from each other and our competitive depreciations of each other are clouds of darkness that help to hide from us your true face, help us to know what these blockages are, and to see them for the clouds that shut us off not only from each other but from you.

Ecumenism and Christian Charity

One of the places where the Christian witness is most betrayed by the want of ecumenical charity is in the mission field. When Africans and Asians meet the witness to Christ in fifty different versions each claiming its accent as the truth and with much jealousy about the advances of the others, it is not only confusing; it also belittles the whole witness. In the past seventy-five years there has been some remarkable improvement in this area, and the small joint ventures which the National Councils, backed by the World Council of Churches, have made in territories like Kenya and Zambia, as well as the establishment of the Church of South India, have given much encouragement for the future and have been one of the sources of ecumenical fervor in the home churches. But the denominational imperialism of the great and small churches is still far from dead, and it continues to flourish in less obvious but equally powerful ways in spite of all of the efforts at publicly advancing the ecumenical cause. It is not a disease of church officials alone. They are encouraged in it by a kind of denominational chauvinism which is so deeply rooted in the hearts of the laity that the officials can always count on rallying it if they find themselves in need of support.

There is, of course, something unique and infinitely precious in each of the religious traditions which needs to be conserved. No least-common-denominator level of enforced unity that would wipe out these precious contributions would be acceptable to any. But the uncommitted world will not be touched until there appears a whole new level of charity towards each other on the part of the branches of the Christian church.

O God, use your sharpest sickle on the weeds of denominational pride and possessiveness that are forever springing up anew in my heart and in the heart of our society. Give us such a vision of your passionate love for us all and of the task still to be undertaken in the world that we shall take our sisters and brothers to our bosoms as we set out together to answer your beckoning invitation.

The approaches which Roman Catholics and Protestants have made to each other in the recent past are new phenomena here in the United States, but they are not as novel on the continent of Europe. In a country like Germany, this process of trying to understand each other has been going on for more than sixty years. In the Hitler period it was intensified to a point where the walls between the groups at moments became paper thin, and affection for and charity and gratitude toward each other abounded. When the screw of this totalitarian government's controls and maneuvering tightened on all of the religious groups, the Roman Catholics discovered their lay people needed the strengthening of the Bible. They set about providing millions of copies of the New Testament and encouraged the laity to study it and use it for their strengthening. With the Gestapo present to listen to and record every sermon, the Protestants discovered that the liturgy of their Catholic brothers and sisters had much in it to stand up against such a government and to strengthen the faithful.

I have heard each of the three men, Dr. Stoeltzer, a high-church Lutheran; Professor Ritter, a low-church Lutheran; and Pater Rosch, a Jesuit, tell of the night in early April, 1945, when with all three chained to the wall in a Berlin prison, expecting to be taken out and either shot or beheaded early the next morning by the Nazi liquidation squad, they gave communion to each other. At such moments, you may not belong to my church but you belong to my God and that is all that matters. The ecumenical miracle of Vatican Council II was prepared for by costly common suffering, common charity, and common admiration and affection.

O God, we thank you that we are alive in a day when the walls are crumbling and the gates are being opened and the charity and affection of those who serve you are increasing until they may kindle a great fire in the heart of the world. Kindle this flame in me, O God, that I may not obstruct but may help to inflame the heart of the world with this new ecumenical spirit.

Ecumenism and a Church for All Who Breathe

When we think of what ecumenism is really for, we have to think of what the church was really meant for. A look at the Scriptures is sobering to many who had thought of the church as an organ for their personal edification. In that famous verse, John 3:16, what is often overlooked is that it begins by saying "For God so loved *the world.*" The church is not a shelter for the saved. It is not a Noah's ark to bring a representative group of carefully selected pairs through the wreck of the world to ultimate salvation. The church is for *the world* and for its redemption. At its best, whether it is large or small, the church is a symbol to the world that there is One at the ground of things who cares for it and for its ultimate drawing into a community where love reigns and that no flight from this, no matter how far it may go, can ever quench that love that longs for its healing. The church is less like Noah's ark than like the sprig of olive leaf that the dove brought back symbolizing that there was a future for humankind and that there is no shaking off this caring One who draws at the world's heart and draws it toward the peaceable kingdom.

When Pope John XXIII, of blessed memory, was alive, he mentioned one day that he had been thinking very much about some of his children in Rome who were in prison. Since they could not very well come to see him, he decided that very day to go to see them. He went to a Roman prison where all types of prisoners were confined and gave them a sermon on the mercy and forgiveness of the all-loving God that knew no limitations. When the talk was over a prisoner who was a murderer came up to him and said, "Your Holiness, does what you said about the mercy and forgiveness of God hold even for me?" John, without a word of reply, simply reached out to the man and drew him to his breast. This gesture of Pope John's speaks of the true ecumenism. This love of God knows no bounds: it reaches out to Roman Catholics, non-Roman Catholic Christians, those of all the world's religions, and even to those in the latent church.

O God, thrust out my boundaries of human compassion and caring. Take away my hesitations and reservations and help me to find the true neighbor in all whom it is my privilege to meet. Quicken me until I may be willing to follow your bidding to "Walk gladly over the world answering to that of God in everyone."

Ecumenism in the minds of many must at least stay within the frontier of those who acknowledge Christ as the true window to the redemptive love of God. Therefore there can be no expanding of the ecumenical responsibility to our relations with the billions of men and women who find their religious home in Islam, in Judaism, in Hinduism, and in Buddhism, to say nothing of the other world religions. But we are entering a day when even this limitation seems to be coming into question. Great Roman Catholic scholars like Jacques Cuttat, Zaehner, and DeLubac have even gone so far as to suggest that in addition to the special revelation in Christ there is a general revelation of God which streams through each of these great religions and that God has never been without a witness.

But these scholars go a step further than a theory of general or preparatory revelation. They even suggest that the Holy Spirit may be speaking to present-day Christianity through the Hindu religion and may have a message of simplicity, of contemplation, of the expectation of and yearning for sanctity which it may never receive if it does not engage in the deepest encounter with its Hindu brothers and sisters. And what holds for Hinduism holds, too, for Buddhism, for Judaism, and Islam. What an inclusiveness in the work of Christ such a view conceives of, and yet twenty years from now what seems so radical about such a view will likely be a commonplace. Pope John's arms and the passionate love of God are truly all embracing.

O God, my boat is so small and your sea is so great. My love is so provincial and your love so limitless. Sweep away my frontiers, O God, and hand in hand with Christ let me move with great openness to understand my brothers and sisters and to be open for the message that your Holy Spirit may have for me through their witness, as I share with them what is most holy to me.

Ecumenism and Secularism

One of the striking ecumenical features of our time is the reassessment which we are all being compelled to make of what has been called secularism. A generation ago secularism was regarded as the sworn enemy-rival of the Christian religion. Today we see that to define secularism as tooling a world to operate without God was perhaps to have underestimated both God's own hidden ways of operation and the social situation where, without the public proclamation of God, ethical principles were often being embodied that implemented our concern for the worth and dignity of human beings on a scale beyond anything that people of religion had ever dreamed was practically possible. To put a floor under poverty, to guarantee decent medical care to the whole population, to give to all the access to an adequate education and to jobs, to improve the court's approach to delinquency: are these of no concern to the God of the living?

The missionaries of the past generations need little defense in the way they have shared the Christian gospel in the countries of the East. But it is sobering to note how often the spirit and practice of Asia have seemed to be even more deeply shaped by the influence of western legal and political institutions, western labor practices, western institutions for the care of those in need. What is less often noted is that these exportable traits are deeply impregnated with spiritual principles of the infinite worth of humankind, of our acceptance of the created world as not something to be renounced but to be reshaped in order to enhance our lives, and of the liability we each bear for the well-being of the other—all of which walk right out of the Judeo-Christian heritage of the West.

O God, we who so easily think we are your appointed emissaries and that we speak for your ways with humankind, forgive us for our brashness and may our humiliation lead to humility and to a great openness to your secret working everywhere.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, a lecturer named Robert Ingersoll published a little volume called "Forty-four Lectures on Atheism." It turned up among some books that I meant to discard, and in reading it again after a thirty-year interval, I was amazed to find that what this man was really attacking was not so much God as the social infidelities that Christians practice in God's name. The living God can welcome such attacks. Yet there is an atheism which simply ignores God and makes self-willed decisions that ride roughshod over what God has sought to disclose to us about the way to live. This atheism is deeply rooted in us all.

Who, after all, is the real atheist, and how are we to approach those who profess to deny the existence and operativeness of God in our world? This question was so burning and proved so moving to Vatican Council II that it appointed a new Secretariat for the Non-Believers to make the most searching and sincere study of atheism and to try to find out what it is that the atheist is protesting against and what it is that the atheist is giving his own allegiance to. "Not every one who saith unto me, Lord, Lord shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven." Once again at this extreme rim of the ecumenical outreach, "What is the hidden God saying to me through the witness of those who deny him?"

O God, who knows the true heart of each of us, and who knows how fiercely self-will with all its tentacles still smolders there, help us to withhold judgment and to listen with the inward ear not alone to our atheist friends' words but to what they are really, in all sincerity, trying to say. Help us to be overwhelmed afresh by the conviction that no one ever is beyond either your reach or your caring, and that it is only when we bring our brothers and sisters with us that we can see your face.

Corporate Worship and the Worshiper

Just before sunset on any Friday in the Orthodox quarter of Jerusalem's Israel, you will find pious Orthodox Jews running to get to the synagogue in order to be in their places before the great moment when the Jewish Sabbath begins. For Jews, to worship corporately as they cross the threshold into the Sabbath is to join God in the wonderful seventh day of rest after the creation of the world, to praise and thank God for his creation, preservation, and tireless concern for us, and for all creation.

This accent on celebration is equally characteristic of truly Christian worship. When I join with others in the worship of God, I do not come in a doleful mood or simply with my cup in my hand for what I can get. Rather, I come in my best, to bring my gift to God in thanks for himself, for Jesus Christ, for the company of saints, for the church, and for all that he has done for me.

When one of my friends has a birthday, I do not have to join the party to celebrate the event. I can merely telephone or write a letter, or send a gift by another. But if I am able and I really want to do him honor, I join with friends and I go to the celebration. Attendance at the worship of God is not so different. If I care, I am there.

The celebration with others springs from deep roots in us all, for those things that are most precious to us we inevitably want to share with others. The higher the experience, the greater is this corporate yearning. The common discovery that there is a God who cares, that Christ is alive in our hearts today, that there is a common work for us to do, draws us almost irresistibly to corporate worship. If this seems to have become a habit, thank God for our having established such a good one and let us see that it is continued.

O God, for the freedom to worship and the appointed occasions to join with my sisters and brothers to celebrate your infinite goodness and care, with all my heart, I give you thanks.

Professor Whitehead's remark that "religion is what we do with our solitariness" has always been a dangerous half-truth. In prayer we might better say that there is a time to be alone and a time to be with others. For there is a dimension in corporate worship, in praying together, which is not present in the solitariness of private prayer.

Martin Luther once confessed, "At home in my own house, there is no warmth and vigor in me but in the church when the multitude is gathered together, a fire is kindled in my heart and it breaks its way through." Such widely separated groups as the Orthodox and the Quakers look upon the experience of the whole worshiping community gathered in corporate prayer as the truest organ of the Holy Spirit. But this experience is no more than the fulfilling of the promise that Jesus made: "for where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

In corporate prayer, Christ seems to gather the worshiping community and to draw each person from her separate solitariness into the household of faith. He seems to dissolve much of the pride and possessiveness that often creep into private prayer. He makes the individual worshiper realize afresh that she is just one ordinary sheep in God's fold and he often sweeps her heart with an overwhelming sense of her creatureliness. But corporate worship does not stop there. At its best it leads on to personal absolution from grievous sin, personal commitment to new levels of life, and personal discoveries that Christ's gift is always linked with a task that may be laid upon the worshiper and that calls for prompt fulfillment. Now the corporate worshiper belongs not to herself alone but to the whole company of the servants of God.

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O God, how can I ever thank you for the rhythm of the spiritual life in which private and corporate prayer, far from competing or conflicting, truly support each other. O Friend of my soul, nurture both in me and help me always to be faithful to the one without neglecting the other.